WOMEN AND DISASTER
- The Housing Condition of Single Mother Households in Ordinary Times and in A Disaster -

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This paper aims to examine 1) housing condition of single mother households in ordinary times, 2) the reason why governmental housing assistance for single mother households doesn’t meet their housing needs, 3) their housing situation in the Great Hanshin Awaji earthquake.

Usual housing conditions are closely connected to the housing damage in a disaster. In the Great Hanshin Awaji earthquake 80% of deaths were caused by housing damage. According to the fire department report, 1,000 more women died in the Great Hanshin Awaji earthquake than men. The details of this factor have not been examined. However the media and activists have insisted that women’s low economic status relegated them to lower quality housing and many women’s houses were damaged by the earthquake.

According to the report of Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare in 2003 the number of single mother is 1,225,400. Single mother households especially belong to the poorest group of all households. Although over 80% of single mother households have a job over 50% of them live at or below the poverty line. Under the profit-oriented housing provision it’s hard for low-income people to secure the affordable housing. Single mother households might have been more vulnerable in the disaster.

According to the report of Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare the owner occupation rate of single mothers (20.6%) is about one third of general rate. Instead they tend to live in rental housing or with relatives. Compared to general households the rate of single mother households living below the minimum housing standard is much higher. Especially single mothers’ housing quality of private rental is the lowest (Kuzunishi 2005). Moreover single mothers' housing expense to income ratio (compares the sum of monthly housing expenses to monthly gross income) is much higher than general rate. The single mother household’s average ratio is about 26%, and the ratio in private housing is 36% (Kuzunishi 2005). Although the ratio of 30% is generally considered to be hardship, housing expense is a large burden for single mother households.

There are 3 kinds of housing assistance for single mother households in Japan. First is accommodation intended for emergency, transitional, or temporary housing. However most accommodations are old and the living space is narrow. Moreover there is discrimination towards the residents. So single mothers tend to avoid being in this accommodation and there are many vacancies. According to the national single parent households survey only 1.6% of all single mother households have used this accommodation. And the next one is loan system. This loan is available for purchasing and renovating housing, and to prepare for moving. But it is difficult for single mothers to get this loan because of strict criteria. And also single mothers avoid applying for this loan because they are incapable to repay it. According to the national single parent households survey about 17% of all single mother households have used this loan system. The last one is public housing. The single
others need public housing is very high. However, public housing doesn’t meet their needs for 3 reasons. First, supply is not enough. Next, there are many vacancies in inconvenient locations but few in convenient locations. Single mother households have specific needs in neighborhood. About 70% of single mother households moved out of their marital housing after divorce and most of them avoid making their children transfer to another school and also they want to live close to their relatives. There are few public housing meeting this limited requirement. Last, the public housing can’t address immediate or sudden housing needs. Most single mother households need to secure stable housing before or right after divorce. However, public housing requires time between application and entrance. For these reasons, single mother households tend to live in lower quality private rental housing and with relatives these housing.

Their ordinary housing conditions are closely related to housing damage in the Great Hanshin Awaji earthquake. According to Hyogo single mother survey, 80% of single mother households’ houses were damaged by the earthquake. Moreover, according to the Takarazuka welfare department report the housing damage level of single mother households is higher than welfare recipients’. The rental assistance limit for welfare recipients is 55,000 yen per month. Probably housing of 55,000 yen is lower quality. Half of all single mother households reach the criteria as welfare recipients. However, according to the report of Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, only 10% of single mother households are welfare recipients because of governmental budget cuts. Another reason that single mothers are not on welfare is because they want to avoid the stigma of welfare. Therefore, probably some of single mother households pay equal or less than the 55,000 yen rent per month. For these reasons, single mother households’ houses were more damaged.

For single mother households in poverty, it’s hard to reconstruct their life. According to Hyogo single mother survey, the rate of rental housing decreased and the rate of living with relatives increased from 1985 to 1996. And 1.8% of single mother households were in temporary housing in 1996. Probably, many single mother households evacuated to their relatives house right after the earthquake. And Takarazuka welfare department report shows only 40% of single mothers whose houses were completely damaged entered the temporary housing. Although the government gave single mother household high priority to enter the temporary housing, why didn’t many single mother households enter the temporary housing? According to my interview with journalists of Kobe newspaper, activists and counselors for single mother households, there are 2 main reasons single mother households avoided entering the temporary housing.

First, single mother households have specific needs in former neighborhoods. Hyogo pref. single mothers survey shows 80% of single mother households kept working at former work place after the earthquake. The income was not enough. But the unstable situations after the earthquake made single mothers keep working. And single mothers avoid making their children transfer to another school. However, temporary housing was generally constructed in inconvenient areas so they couldn’t move to temporary housing. Next reason is single mother households couldn’t leave their children in temporary housing alone while they were at work. There was shortage of preschool because many were damaged by earthquake. For these reasons, single mother households were less likely to be in temporary housing. According to Hyogo pref. single mothers survey form 1996 to 2004, the rate of public housing has increased. Their need for disaster reconstruction public housing might have been much higher. However, disaster reconstruction public housing was also constructed in remote areas. According to my interview with a counselor in Hyogo pref. many single mother households have kept applying for public housing that is convenient. That’s why the rate of public housing of single mother households has risen since 1996. However, it was not easy for victims to enter public housing because there was a lot of competition. Many victims including single mother households who were reluctant to move into public housing could not receive any governmental housing assistance.

In summary, there are 3 issues. First, the housing condition of single mother households in usual times is very inferior. Next, in times disaster, the inadequate housing condition of single mother households leads to excessive housing damage to houses for which they lack financial resources to recover. Finally, both in ordinary times and disaster, governmental housing assistance for single mother households is insufficient and doesn’t meet their needs.